

# "CONTRABAND"

## A Romance of the North Atlantic

by RANDALL PARRISH

COPYRIGHT  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

AUTHOR OF "MY LADY OF THE NORTH," "MAID OF THE FOREST," ETC.

### CHAPTER XIX.

#### A French Man-of-War.

No food was brought me during the afternoon, nor had I eaten all day, yet my mental state was such I had no consciousness of hunger. I had discovered no means of creating a light, although my eyes were sufficiently accustomed to dimness to enable me to move about my narrow quarters safely enough.

It must have been between eight and nine o'clock when the key turned in the lock of my door, and Liverpool looked in. The light from the swinging lamp in the main cabin flared into my eyes, blinding me, yet I recognized his face, and saw Dade close behind him, bearing a tray. Neither of them spoke, but Red, having assured himself of my presence, stood aside, and motioned the steward to enter. The latter deposited the laden tray on the desk, and backed out silently, every movement showing him thoroughly cowed by his guardian. Realizing that any word from me would only result in insult, I remained silent, and the two disappeared, closing and locking the door behind them. I confess I ate the food with relish, for it was well cooked, and served with some daintiness. After a second cup of coffee I felt much more like myself, rummaging through the captain's chest until I found some tobacco and a pipe, which I at once appropriated to my own use. No one returned for the emptied dishes, and I sat for a long while at the open port smoking, the blue spiral swept away by the rush of air, and my eyes on the starlit waters.

I had been sailor long enough to accept the ordinary perils of the sea as part of the profession. Nothing was too strange to be true at sea; and so it was not the position in which I found myself; not the possible fate of the Indian Chief, or of her captured officers, which weighed most upon my mind—it was Vera Carrington. If those villains scuttled the ship; if they took to the boats to save themselves, leaving us to drown like rats, what would they do with the girl? Would McCann dare to take her with him? Would he venture leaving her alive to bear witness to his crime? There was but one answer—not unless she was utterly in his power. Either he must quiet her by force, and thus bring her spirit to his will, or else compel her to marry him, and so legally seal her lips. And the man was perfectly capable of taking either course—whichever seemed easier.

This was the consideration which served partially to arouse me from coma. I could not continue to sit there waiting for Fate to approach; better far to go forth and meet it in manly fashion. I had a good strong knife in my pocket, and the lock of the door was a common one, the wood surrounding it soft pine. There was nothing in that obstacle to prevent my escape, and if I was discovered at large, my punishment would merely be confinement elsewhere. I had therefore nothing to lose, but everything to gain by the experiment. The hour was late, the night had thus far been a quiet one, and it was quite probable the fellow, com-

fortably situated, was drowsing at his task. Anyhow, I would make little noise, and the chance was worth taking.

The labor proved easier than I had supposed. The soft pine yielded easily to the sharp blade, and a very few moments sufficed to cut the lock clear, enabling me to open the door silently and take cautious survey of the main cabin. At first I doubted the presence of anyone, and had, indeed, ventured forth before perceiving the form of a man outstretched on the divan surrounding the butt of the mizzenmast. The fellow was asleep, yet restless enough to be dangerous. His face was in shadow, and I thought it best not to venture close enough to identify him, although the dim light revealed a belt about his waist, and the bulging butt of a revolver. Convinced that my only hope of accomplishment lay in the discovery and release of my fellow prisoners, I crept across the deserted cabin, and entered the passage leading forward. Somewhere amidships these were surely confined. But I was not destined to discover where.

I had taken scarcely a step when the companion door opened, and a man started down the stairs. Crouched in the darkness, I saw the sleeping guard, aroused by the noise, spring upright, and as the light fell on his face, I recognized a seaman named Dubois. The man on the stairs paused, gripping the rail, staring down as though momentarily blinded by the light.

"Is that you, Dubois?" he asked in the harsh croak belonging to Jim White.

"D— you—you was asleep."

"I lay back to rest, but I was not asleep, monsieur—non, non."

"Well, we won't fight over that now. You're the only Frenchman on board, and we want you on deck. Go on up; stay here. Aye, man, ver better

leave the gun."

"Vat ees it, Monsieur White? Why they want me on deck?"

"What's the difference, you frog-eater? But I'll tell yer anyhow. There is a cruiser showing up off our port quarter, which has caught sight of us. She looks Frenchy, and if there is a hall, it will be up to you to answer—you are the only one aboard this hooker who talks the lingo like a native, see!"

Dubois stared, his lips parted in sudden terror.

"A French warship; eet hall us?"

"Not yet; but they are bound to question us, all right. There! did you hear that? A shot across our bows, politely asking us to heave to; aye! and we are slowing down; come, hurry up on deck with you, Frenchy."

"But—but, monsieur, what ees it I can say? I know not ze words, ze-ze explanation."

"You speak French, don't you?"

"Oul, monsieur, oui, but—but I know not what to speak."

"Well, don't let that worry you. McCann will tell you—but God pity you, Dubois, if you fail to repeat it. Up with you now, and be lively about it!"

All thought of my former purpose vanished from my mind as I realized this new chance of rescue. At any risk I must attain quickly to the open deck, where I could create an alarm sufficient to awaken suspicion on board the approaching Frenchman. McCann's only hope of escape lay in some satisfactory explanation, which would lull the suspicions of the French commander—some lie smooth enough to prevent boarding and search.

Assured that White was beyond observation of any of my movements, I crept cautiously around the stair rail, and noiselessly mounted the steps. I found the after part of the main deck deserted, although forward of the mainmast I could perceive dark blotches along the port rail, where members of the watching party were observing the approach of the French cruiser. With heart beating like a trip-hammer, I made my way along the front of the cabin, until I ventured to peer over the port rail, secure that my presence on deck was screened by the deep shadows in which I lurked.

The gleam of the stars alone revealed the glittering surface of the sea, but the night was clear of fog, and the



The Black Outline of the French Warship was Plainly Visible.

black outline of the French warship was plainly visible, approaching us at half-speed, and silently closing up the narrowing gap of water between the two vessels. I felt the heart come up into my throat as I gazed spellbound, every nerve in me throbbing painfully. A single voice echoing along those decks yonder could blow us out of the water. Even as I stared at the grim spectacle, the slim figure of a man appeared at the end of the bridge, and a voice hailed us in French.

"Ahoy there! What ship is that?"

There was a shuffling of feet above me; then McCann spoke in English:

"The American freighter Indian Chief, bound for Liverpool."

"Is there anyone aboard who speaks French?"

I heard them hustle Dubois forward to the rail, and caught a word or two of McCann's swift threat hissed into his ear; then the frightened Frenchman stammered out an answer.

"Oul, monsieur, je parle Français."

"Then talk up; what ship is that?"

I could hear McCann prompting, and Dubois echoing the words put in his mouth.

"The Indian Chief, Boston, McCann, master, from St. Johns to Liverpool, two days out."

"With what cargo?"

"Miscellaneous; mostly farm machinery."

A searchlight swept us fore and aft, but finally settled on the little group of men clustered together on the poop

rail. "You're north of your course." There was an instant of hesitation; then Dubois' explanation: "We ran before the storm last night, monsieur, having been struck by lightning." "Ah, I see; that accounts for your stump of a foremast and the temporary wheel aft. What shape are your boats in?" "Three of them left, monsieur." "Send the captain, with the Frenchmen, over with the ship's papers. Be lively about it." "Oul, monsieur; what is the name of the warship?" "The French cruiser Descartes, on patrol. Get your boat over." What would McCann do? Was he ready for such an emergency as this? Had he taken the precaution to alter the ship's manifest, or even forged a new one? There was a moment of excited talk on the deck above me; then McCann descended the starboard ladder, and disappeared through the companion, evidently after the ship's papers. Liverpool's voice ordering the watch to lower number five boat, and stand by, sung out from the poop rail. McCann emerged from the companion, called up to Liverpool, waving his hand with a laugh full of confidence, and went forward. A moment later he was joined by Dubois, and the two men clambered over the rail and dropped into the lowered boat. His actions, his easy manner, startled me; those must be carefully forged papers in his pocket to enable him to proceed with such confidence. Slowly I lifted myself until I could peer over the side at the dark expanse of water between the vessels. The searchlight of the warship rested in a glare of white on the small boat bobbing up and down, revealing the men at the oars, and McCann and Dubois in the stern sheets. Neither glanced back, but I could see their faces clearly, and McCann was smiling as though at an excellent joke.

### CHAPTER XX.

#### The Cruiser Leaves Us.

I was still clinging to the rail, and staring down at the light; I heard nothing, felt no premonition of alarm, when suddenly a hand gripped my throat, the great fingers stifling every effort to cry out. Before I could resist, or even brace myself, another hand was clapped over my mouth and I was fairly hurled back below the shelter of the rail, dragged across the black deck, and thrown through the opened door of the companion. This was accomplished so quickly, and with so little evidence of struggle, as to attract no notice from the Frenchman, from whose deck no doubt every eye was fastened upon the approaching boat. Half hurled, half dragged, I plunged into the dimly lit cabin, and it was not until I struck the lower deck that I even realized clearly what had occurred, or who were my assailants. I fell sprawling on one shoulder, but was as instantly on my feet, bruised, but otherwise uninjured, maddened by a rage beyond all control. White, emerging from the stateroom, through the port of which he had been viewing the scene alongside, startled by the sudden uproar, a revolver gripped in his hand, was the first face I saw.

"What the—!" he exclaimed in bewilderment, but before he could say more my fist jammed into his jaw, and the fellow went over full length on the deck, the gun flying from his opening fingers. I had possession of it before he could stop me, and was backed against the door of a stateroom opposite, murder in my heart as I confronted the two who had flung me from the top of the steps. I recognized them now for the first time—Liverpool Red and Tom Dugan. But one thought seethed in my brain—to kill.

"Curse you both!" I cried, covering them as they shrank back, "we'll end this thing right here."

Red gripped Rugan, holding the Irishman in front of him as a shield. My revolver covered them both, my fingers nervous on the trigger. Suddenly the door behind me yielded and I staggered back, unable to regain my balance until fairly within the stateroom. With a crash the door closed, instantly shutting out the surprised faces of the two men in the cabin; a key creaked in the lock, and Vera Carrington fronted me, her back against the wood.

"Were—were they trying to kill you?" she panted.

"They certainly did their best," I answered, "but it was my turn when you dropped me in here."

"You—you mean that I made a mistake—that you were in no danger?"

"I had the upper hand. I took this revolver away from White, and do not believe either of the others were armed. In another second I should have fired. Our only hope of rescue lies in creating

an alarm; there is a French cruiser lying just off our port quarter."

"A French cruiser! We have been captured?"

"No; merely halted and questioned. The Frenchman does not even suspect anything wrong. I was endeavoring to sound an alarm when these fellows seized me, and threw me down the stairs into the cabin."

"But how did you get on deck? And where did you procure the revolver?"

"I cut my way out; the gun was taken from White. Don't block the way, Miss Vera! I must get to the deck again or it will be too late."

"Is McCann out there?"

"No; only Red, and a sailor named Dugan. White is knocked out, and McCann has gone aboard the cruiser. He has forged papers with him. Let me go; I can fight my way through with this gun. Those devils will either make way or get hurt."

She stammered aside and with no

other thought but the necessity for action, I turned the key in the lock and flung the door open. The main deck was deserted; to my surprise, all three of the men had disappeared. With revolver gripped in one hand, I stepped forward, searching with suspicious eyes every dark corner, dimly conscious that the girl followed. I had attained the foot of the stairs, even advanced a step upward, before my progress was arrested. Suddenly the companion door was flung open and a mob of men confronted me, surging in through the narrow space from the deck. I drew instantly back, stunned by sight of McCann in their lead, realizing instantly that our effort to attain the open was already too late.

"There he is!" he cried eagerly. "Get him, you men. Lively now; there's no danger; if he lifts that gun, he's a dead man."

I was staring straight into the black muzzle leveled at my head, but before I could move, or even determine what was best to be done, Vera stood between me and the mob on the stairs.

"Go back! back to my stateroom; he'll never shoot me. Please, please go back."

I was hot-headed enough to have fought them all, but to attempt resistance then would have endangered her life. I retained sense sufficient to know this, and that only force would cast her aside. I heard McCann mutter an oath, and Red roar out some order, punctured with profanity, yet did not truly comprehend what efforts were being made to block our retreat. Before a hand could grasp either of us, we were within the shelter of the stateroom, and the girl had closed and locked the door. Fists pounded on the



"There'll Be Six of You Dead if You Break In This Door."

wood in impotent rage, and I heard voices urging others to bring implements with which to batter their way in.

"McCann," I shouted, "call off your men! I have six bullets here; and there'll be six of you dead if you break in this door."

There was silence; then a mutter of voices—one angry with threat, others seemingly urging compromise. Whatever the argument, the advocates of peace seemed in the majority, for out of the hubbub McCann spoke loud enough to be plainly heard.

"There is no use of your threats, Hollis," he said, rapping on the door, "we have weapons as well as you, and you cannot fight alone against the whole ship's crew. The best thing for you to do now is to listen to reason."

"What has become of the French cruiser?"

He laughed, and I could hear Liverpool join in rather noisily.

"Five miles to leeward, and going strong. She'll be out of sight in two hours. There's no hope for you there, my man."

"You showed forged papers?"

"Aye; that was easy enough; you never supposed I was such a fool as to overlook that, did you? We are from St. Johns to Liverpool, with a miscellaneous cargo. The fellow swallowed my yarn as though it was sugar candy. And the best of it is, that is the only war vessel patrolling these waters; we have a cinch."

"Not without me," I answered calmly, after a pause in which my mind gripped the situation. "The telltale compass shows you are three points off your course now. I'll talk with you, McCann, but if I continue to navigate this ship it will be at my own terms, and you'll either give me what I ask, or we'll fight it out here and now."

"What are your terms?"

I took time to think, determined to demand every concession I dared ask.

assured that I held the winning hand.

"Well," I said finally, "this coast to the west of us is no joke at any season of the year, and there are sea currents along here to fool any seaman. You can take the chances if you want to, but it is my belief you fools will have this ship on the rocks within twenty-four hours, if you trust in blind reckoning."

"D— it," sung out Liverpool hoarsely, "we don't need no sermon on the dangers of the deep. Stow the gaff, an' tell us what yer want."

"I will," I snapped back. "The freedom of the ship for both myself and Miss Carrington. Our meals are to be served privately, and the lady is not to be addressed by any one of you."

"My Gawd," exclaimed a muffled voice, "you don't want much! Who

are you, the czar of Russia?"

"I am the rightful captain of this ship," I returned stiffly, "and the only man on board capable of navigating her. You can accept my terms, or leave them; and those are not all. McCann, I am talking to you, not that sea scum."

"All right; go ahead. What else?"

"I am to retain this revolver for protection, and the key to my stateroom; Miss Carrington is also to retain her key. When you men desert ship, which I know you plan to do, the Indian Chief is to be left in seaworthy condition. That's all."

"Enough, I should think. You must consider your services indispensable. However, I accept the terms, providing you agree to do what we ask in return."

"That I navigate the ship to within fifty miles of St. Johns; notify you when we reach that point, and give you correct sailing directions."

"That is what we want."

"Good; I accept. Take your men out of the cabin."

I stood motionless, still gripping the revolver in one hand, listening to catch every sound the other side of the closed door. There was a muttered discussion, the words mostly inaudible, although I heard enough to convince me that McCann was urging acceptance of my conditions on the ground that it would be impossible for me, alone, and under surveillance, to add to their danger. Some words were added in so low a tone as to fail to reach my ear, but whatever they were, they evoked a laugh, and seemed to restore the dissatisfied to better humor. Liverpool took sides with McCann in the dispute, and the two united must have prevailed, for the men finally dispersed, and we could hear their heavy sea boots tramping up the stairs.

Relieved of the strain, I turned to meet the questioning eyes of the girl.

"That—that was better than fighting—wasn't it?" she asked almost anxiously.

"Yes; I lost my head for the moment, and could only think of reaching deck, and shouting an alarm to the cruiser."

"It was too late for that."

"Yes; we know it was now, and probably I would never have reached there alive. I am very thankful to you."

"To me!" Her lips smiled, although her eyes remained grave. "Why, I merely opened a door—besides, even that act was supremely selfish."

"I cannot conceive how."

"You do not? Yet surely you can realize what it would mean to me to be left alone on board—with Fergus McCann. I do so despise the creature that I shrink from even looking into his eyes. It—it was to avoid meeting him again that I locked the door."

"He talked with you, then?"

"Yes, at the table. We were alone for a moment, and it was his manner which frightened me rather than any words said. I left the table without speaking. He—he followed me, however, and tried my stateroom door."

"Saying nothing?"

"No; it was locked, and—and he laughed and went away."

"I suspect the man is almost as much afraid of you as you are of him," I said quietly, "and is puzzled what to do with you."

"Afraid of me—why?"

"Well, if you were not aboard, his problem would be a much easier one to solve. The lives of none of the rest of us would weigh much in the calculation."

"And you think my life does?"

"Undoubtedly. McCann is a villain by nature; he was born with criminal instincts, which have no wise been changed by the possession of wealth. But he is fully awake to the peril of his position. The fellow is a coward back of all his bluff, and I do not think his criminal instincts are bloodthirsty. But he has drifted into a desperate situation, from which he must extricate himself at any cost."

"You mean—oh, not that?"

"I mean there is but one sure solution—dead men tell no tales."

### CHAPTER XXI.

#### A Plan to Save Ourselves.

She stood with hands clasped, and parted lips, her eyes wide open with unconcealed horror, for the moment unable to utter a word.

"You—you actually think that, Mr. Hollis? You mean he would be willing to—murder all on board to protect himself?"

"If assured such an act would bring safety, I do not believe he would hesitate at even that crime. To be perfectly plain, Miss Vera, it is my judgment that your presence on board presents the only problem unsolved."

"My presence! Why, he has no cause to fear me. No one knows where I am. If I never appeared alive again, not a soul could ever account for my disappearance."

"True, and probably McCann is fully aware of these conditions. But he wishes you alive, not dead. That is what makes the problem."

She crossed the narrow space of deck, and grasped my coat in her fingers.

"Oh! this is too terrible! He—he cannot imagine it possible—"

"And why not?" I interrupted. "He is all-powerful on board. He judges the virtue of others by his own standard. He dreams that you might even make that bargain to preserve life."

"That I would marry him?"

"Marriage would seal your lips; would win him safety, and also your

worth playing for, surely."

"And the others? What would be the fate of you and the others if I made that hateful bargain?"

"In no way different, I imagine, from what it will be if you refuse," I said soberly—and my hand closed on hers. "McCann has no intention that we shall ever put foot on shore. He would be a fool to permit such a thing."

"You think it all planned out?"

"In detail; McCann, Liverpool and White know exactly what they intend doing. Their questioning of me, and their scrutiny of the chart, convinces me of this. I even believe now I could name the other men of the crew who will be in their boat, when they abandon ship—Dugan, Dubois, Sachs and the negro, Watson, with perhaps two others I am not so sure of. Why, Miss Vera, you heard what I was compelled to assent to a moment ago. I am to pilot the Indian Chief to within fifty miles of the harbor of St. Johns, timing our arrival at that point to some hour of the night. I am to give McCann notice of our arrival there, and furnish him with exact sailing directions to complete the course. This means that the crew expect to abandon the ship there, and take to the boats. There are enough remaining in good condition—and just enough—to carry them all, but the Indian Chief will be left with none to rescue those of us who are left on board in case of accident to the vessel."

"And you anticipate accident?"

"I believe the ship will be deserted in an unseaworthy condition—either with her bottom pierced, or her sea-cocks open; and that those of us left aboard will be so confined as to be practically helpless to save the vessel from going down."

"And the men in the boats will get ashore, scatter and never be heard from again. No one will ever learn what became of the Indian Chief, or that we were aboard?"

"The French cruiser will report having spoken us at sea. That will be the last word. The truth will never be made clear. Our fate will be another sea mystery, never explained."

"Some of the crew might talk later—in liquor."

"There is always that danger, and McCann is farsighted enough to guard against it as far as possible. The boats will easily become separated in the darkness. If the others are ever picked up, it will be accidentally by some ship at sea—and there are almost no ships in this ocean. There are few flaws in the plan, as I have figured out."

She did not answer, her eyes on my face, her expression exhibiting the horror she felt at this vivid picture which I had drawn. Then she slowly, gently withdrew her hand from my grasp, sinking into a chair, her head bent forward.

"You—you really believe they actually plan to do all this?" she asked at last. "And what—what about me? You suggested that—that marriage might save me from this fate. Do you think so ill of me as to imagine I would ever consent to such a bargain?"

"What I may imagine has nothing to do with the case, Miss Vera. My thought, and that of Fergus McCann, is not liable to be the same on any subject. The only hope he can have of ever winning you is through threat. He possesses power and can assail you with deadly peril. It is my belief that he contemplates doing so."

"That he will offer me choice of marriage with him, or death?"

"Yes; it will not be put in just so brutal a form, for the fellow has a certain polish over his villainy, but it will mean that."

"Loan me the revolver."

"For what purpose?"

"To kill the brute, if ever he dares such a proposal. Mr. Hollis, I would die before I would ever permit his touch! Marry him to save my life! Why, I am so ashamed I cannot look you in the face; cannot even find words to express my detestation of such a suspicion."

I stepped forward, and my hand gently rested on the bowed shoulder.

"My dear girl," I said earnestly, "look at me, and believe my words. Lift your eyes; I want you to read the truth in my heart. It is not your life alone; it is mine also, and the lives of nearly all the others aboard, which are at stake. For the sake of us all I am going to ask of you a sacrifice."

There had been a mist of tears in the uplifted eyes, but as I paused this had vanished.

"A sacrifice?" she stammered. "That I marry that man?"

"God forbid! No; but that you encourage him to think it possible."

"Oh, I could not—I could not! Do not ask that of me."

"But listen," I urged eagerly, forgetful of all else in the earnestness of my plea. "Vera, listen before you make decision. The only possible hope lies in the freedom of one of us aboard. I can so juggle figures as to keep the ship safely at sea for another day and night, but no longer."

"Someone must be free to act and

(To Be Continued.)

#### Parsnips.

For some reason boiled parsnips were long considered in some regions of Europe to be the proper vegetable to serve with salt fish, but this tradition is not followed in the United States, plain boiled or fried parsnips being commonly served with roast meats of any sort. They are also used for soups, for fritters, and so on.